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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 001973

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PBTS](#) [ODIP](#) [OFDP](#) [VE](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: EVO CONNECTS THE DOTS: PANDO, PNG, AND PROTEST

REF: A. LA PAZ 1964
[1](#)B. LA PAZ 1359

Classified By: ADCM Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In the aftermath of his September 10 announcement declaring Ambassador Goldberg persona non grata, Bolivian President Evo Morales is linking the USG to violence in the opposition departments (states) and specifically to the death of thirty-some people in opposition-controlled Pando Department. Pando appears calm for the moment after the Bolivian military took over the airport September 12, but tensions remain high, with the government promising to impose martial law and the Prefect (Governor) refusing to recognize the state of siege. Over the weekend, Morales all but accused the USG of financing bloodshed in Pando and conflict in the Media Luna and called on social groups to fight and "die" for the government's 'change' agenda. Contradictorily, Morales also called for debating differences with the opposition and assured he would never sever ties with the USG. Meanwhile, pro-Morales forces in El Alto (and possibly beyond) organized a protest September 15. Our contacts claim protesters were prepared to blame the USG for the Pando deaths, demand the removal of the Ambassador (who left September 14), and rehash complaints about the supposed harboring of ex-President Gonzalo "Goni" Sanchez de Lozada. End Summary.

Pando Standoff Continues

[1](#)2. (U) Although Bolivian military forces succeeded in securing the airport in Cobija in the opposition-controlled northern department of Pando (along the Brazilian/Peruvian border) on September 12, the city still belongs to Prefect Leopoldo Fernandez, who claims he will not capitulate or recognize the government's imposing of martial law in Pando. There has been no serious violence since the airport takeover, in which airborne troops secured the runway for troop transports. An opposition-aligned civilian and a soldier were killed in the operation.

[1](#)3. (U) President Evo Morales ordered martial law for Pando the same day, justifying it as a response to a "massacre" and "genocide" he alleged was organized and executed by Fernandez's forces. Eight people were initially reported

killed in the September 11 clash between forces loyal to Fernandez and pro-government campesinos (small farmers) outside Cobija; reports as of September 15 suggest the number of dead may surpass thirty. The majority of the dead seem to have been government-aligned campesinos. Both sides have called for a formal investigation. Opposition contacts inform us that Prefect Fernandez has told his followers not to oppose the military, but that he will not allow the military to take the prefecture or himself.

Conflict Reportedly Started by Pro-Evo Forces

14. (C) Ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) Congresswoman Ana Lucia Reis told PolOff that campesinos initiated the September 11 Pando conflict and warned us "do not let anyone tell you differently." Pro-government campesinos from Beni were attempting to join forces with Pando MAS organizer and ex-Cobija mayor Miguel "Chiquitin" Becerra at his farm about 30 kilometers from Porvenir. Prefect representatives tried to intercept the Beni group somewhere between Porvenir and Cobija. The prefecture representatives were unarmed and suffered the first deaths. Later prefecture forces were reinforced by armed opposition supporters and the campesino side was backed up by supporters from the MAS stronghold of Filadelfia.

Government To Pando: You Are the Weakest Link

15. (C) Reis said that Chiquitin is distributing weapons to campesinos with the intention of taking over Cobija and jailing Prefect Fernandez (Note: A government spokesman announced that Fernandez would be sentenced to thirty years in jail; Fernandez has not been arrested nor tried and has declared that the government will not take either the prefecture or Fernandez himself. End note.) Reis claimed that the MAS strategy is to foment violence with social groups and that MAS regional leaders decided to consolidate forces in Pando, as it was considered an easier target than Beni, where Opposition Prefect Ernesto Suarez is considered stronger than Fernandez (Note: "Chiquitin" Becerra lost by only 400 votes to Fernandez in the 2005 election for prefect. End Note.) Reis said without the military, Chiquitin "will not succeed, but when you are getting that much money you go." She claims Chiquitin receives infusions of Venezuelan cash every time he is called upon by the central government to mobilize MAS supporters. She added that distribution of large sums of Venezuelan cash during referendums this year has boosted Chiquitin's local standing. Reis, who normally discounts the possibility of violence in "laid-back Pando," said she is afraid "for the first time" to return to her Cobija hotel, which she fears will be targeted by opposition radicals, despite her warm relations with opposition leaders.

Forcing the Armed Forces to Evo's Side?

16. (C) Opposition strategist Javier Flores asserted the Pando violence is the result of a government plan designed by Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana and Minister of the Government Alfredo Rada to lure the military into a more proactive role by fomenting confrontations between civilians. (Note: Some sources claim that Quintana is present in Pando organizing the violence on the MAS side. End note.) Flores claimed Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca strongly disagreed with this strategy during a September 7 cabinet meeting, but was overruled and the rest of cabinet was mute. Flores confirmed Reis' version of events and added that Chiquitin planned to initially form a road block between the Cobija and Porvenir to isolate the area from prefecture meddling while Chiquitin prepared pro-government forces for a siege on Cobija.

Opposition: Bolivian Soldier Among "Campesino" Dead

17. (C) Flores said Fernandez's forces captured more captives

than the fifteen hostages reported by the media (note: reportedly the prefecture holds about sixteen hostages while the campesinos hold fourteen.) Flores says that Chiquitin is threatening to kill the opposition hostages to keep information that implicates the government out of the news. Most notably, he claimed September 13 that the opposition had confirmed that one of the "campesino" dead was in fact an active duty military officer. He said he suspected some of the captives who lack identification and will not talk are also Bolivian military or police. Flores claimed the government has infiltrated campesino and social groups with plainclothes officials (mostly loyalists from the military/police) to orchestrate attacks on the opposition largely in order to draw the military into the conflict on the side of the government. He discounted Fernandez's public allegations that Venezuelans are among the organizers, but said it was possible.

Morales Explains PNG; Provides Opening for U.S. Ouster

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17. (U) President Morales publicly explained September 13 that he declared Ambassador Goldberg persona non grata for "conspiring against democracy and promoting the division of Bolivia." Morales called Goldberg the "external authority that heads the division of Bolivia." Morales claimed that Ambassador Goldberg's history as a diplomat in the Balkans was proof of USG plans to "balkanize Bolivia", a common government refrain over the past year (official news agency ABI provided a lengthy readout of Ambassador Goldberg's resume to complement Morales' comments). Evo said the decision was made "for the dignity and sovereignty of our people" and that the action did not signal "any intention to sever relations." He did, however, hold out the possibility that the United States would "opt for this route, which is their right."

The Evo Whisperer: Chavez as PNG Puppet Master

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18. (C) Flores claimed Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is the driver of the dual PNG strategy (Venezuela declared its U.S. Ambassador persona non grata in "solidaridad with Bolivia.) Flores asserted that Chavez essentially "tricked" Evo into making the first PNG move, using Venezuelan "intelligence" linking Ambassador Goldberg to conspiracy. Although he would not reveal his source for the information, Flores asserted that Minister of Defense Walker San Miguel allegedly presented this Venezuelan intelligence during a September 7 evening cabinet meeting. (Minister of Government Alfredo Rada presented a similar list based on government sources.) Most of the "intelligence" is public information, but it also included a list of opposition officials that have gone to the United States with U.S. financing/orchestration (including international visitor programs). Flores said San Miguel characterized opposition Santa Cruz Civic Committee leader Branko Marinkovic's last U.S. trip during the first week of September as "meetings with USG officials." In fact, according to Flores, Marinkovic was with Flores, Senate President Oscar Ortiz, and prefect representatives, participating in strategy meetings with Greenberg Quilan Rosner and other polling/consulting firms. Flores contends that President Morales relies heavily on Venezuelan and Cuban intelligence for any information from within the United States, giving the Venezuelans wide latitude to make things up; Evo believes it all.

ABI: Balkanization By Association

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19. (U) The September 13 state news agency (ABI) story about the Ambassador's PNG also addressed Marinkovic trip. ABI implied nefarious USG involvement by stating that Marinkovic decided to take government institutions only after returning from the United States. The story later implied that Marinkovic's Croat ethnicity predisposed him to, like Ambassador Goldberg, divide Bolivia in a similar way "to what occurred in the Balkans."

Morales: "Change" By Any Means Necessary

¶10. (U) In other comments September 13, Morales called on social groups to mobilize to defend "the process of change" led by his government "or die for the country." Addressing his cocalero base in Cochabamba Department, Morales said "this democratic and cultural revolution has to be completed, it must be culminated." Morales shouted "country or death, we will triumph!" In odd incongruity with these statements, Evo added that he was "disposed to debate our differences with the opposition."

El Alto March to Embassy: Here Comes the Neighborhood II

¶11. (C) El Alto was mobilizing for a march to the Embassy that was planned to continue into the Zona Sur residential area of La Paz. Groups confirmed by EcoPol contacts to participate are basically the same players that organized the June 9 Embassy march: the large and influential Central Regional Workers Union of El Alto (COR) and El Alto neighborhood federation (FEJUVE), in addition to smaller social groups, labor organizations, the El Alto "Popular" Civic Committee (a MAS front organization), minor political party M17 led by radical Roberto De La Cruz, and a pro-MAS student organization (it was unclear whether the students have decided to also continue with their planned September 16 march against the Embassy). These groups have made participation mandatory for their members, enforced through a combination of payments and fines.

¶12. (C) El Alto construction contractor and political operative Felix Montalvo told PolOff September 13 that COR President Edgar Patana also invited and offered payment for participation for groups beyond El Alto: the national small farmer union (CSUTCB), the Ponchos Rojos (indigenous militia), miners from the Department of Oruro, and the La Paz "Popular" Civic Committee (MAS front group). In the wake of the Ambassador's departure, some of the anti-USG impetus for the march has faded and FEJUVE 1st Vice President Luis Huanca told us September 12 that the march would be revamped to target the prefects and mourn the Pando dead. COR legal advisor Martin Quino told PolOff the march is being financed by the Bolivian Government (with Venezuelan funds) in order to link the USG with the Pando deaths. "Evo is looking for someone to blame and you are his target." He added this should not be surprising, since "you have not fought back before; this is nothing new." Montalvo commented that "wanted" posters of Ambassador "Goldbert" printed by the COR for an aborted march in August will be distributed for the march.

Comment

¶13. (C) Evo often cites unassociated pieces of information and links them together by association. This latest three-parter is easily dissected: opposition kills people in Pando, USG supports opposition, USG is responsible for the deaths. Some contacts have also noted that the Embassy "is the only place we can march to," as La Paz provides few opposition or business targets. In fact, in Charge's meeting with Foreign Minister Choquehuanca September 14 (ref A) the FM said that El Alto groups were angered by opposition looting and destruction of MAS properties in the opposition departments and were seeking ways to retaliate, hence the possible targeting of opposition leaders' homes in the Zona Sur residential area of La Paz. End Comment.

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